

A Report to the 34th DISTRICT Spring 2005



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Dear friends and neighbors,

We'd like to thank each one of you who has visited our offices, written, phoned, faxed or emailed us. You've shared your views about many issues ranging from the war in Iraq, to the rising costs of health care, the environment, our transportation system, education, and elections.

Your input helps us understand our communities better and makes our jobs more meaningful, because we know the decisions made in the state capital will affect you.

As you may know, earthquake repairs to the historic Legislative Building were completed last November and the House and Senate are now carrying out the business of the people of Washington under the historic dome. Our Capitol is truly magnificent; we encourage you to see it for yourself the next time you're in Olympia.

One of our main tasks this session –and probably the hardest– is to write a two-year budget. What makes it difficult is that we're struggling to preserve critical programs and services while facing a \$2.2 billion shortfall. We're confident, however, that if people work together and put the public interest first, we'll agree on a budget that reflects our core values:

- intelligent investments in education;
- accessible and affordable health care; and
- family-wage jobs with benefits.

The goal is to ensure that Washington remains a great place to live, work and raise families, while delivering solutions for a large-scale economy.

We must do all we can to make certain that the legislation we adopt promotes social and environmental justice, as well as economic prosperity.

We are honored to represent you in Olympia and we always welcome your comments and ideas.

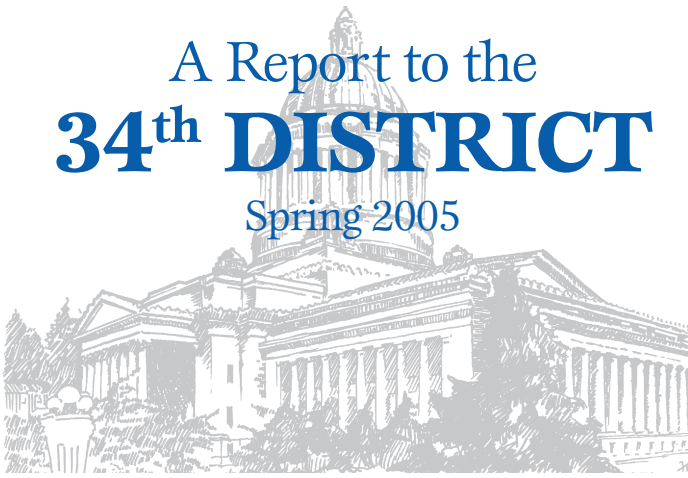
Sincerely,

Rep. Eileen Cody



Rep. Joe McDermott

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Passenger-only Ferries

When the ferry system threatened to end passenger-only ferries last year, we united to save service to Vashon Island and directed Washington State Ferries (WFS) to develop a ten-year plan. This year, we're supporting the plan WFS developed, which calls for a Southworth-Vashon-Seattle passenger-only route to ensure continued service for the long term.



We firmly oppose a competing proposal for a privately-run Southworth to Seattle route, because it would reduce Vashon-Seattle ridership and greatly inflate costs for taxpayers and island ferry users. Convenient and affordable passenger-only service is vital to islanders and to West Seattle residents who don't want even worse traffic around the Fauntleroy auto-ferry terminal. Saving this needed service is a top priority for both of us.

Alaskan Way Viaduct

There is still nothing official to report on our efforts to find state funds for the Alaskan Way Viaduct. More lawmakers now understand that this is an urgent safety issue, but negotiations are ongoing. We'll report back to you when key decisions are made.

Disaster preparedness

Congratulations to the Vashon Disaster Preparedness Coalition! The House of Representatives passed our resolution (HR 4627) to honor the Coalition and its 150 volunteers for their dedication and efforts to save lives and property in the event of a disaster.

Zero-tolerance for oil spills

It cost about \$2 million to clean up last October's sickening Dalco Passage oil spill, which left a filmy coat on several miles of southern Vashon and Maury islands. A smaller spill hit in January. We clearly need more teeth in state oversight of oil industry practices.

We're calling for a citizens' oversight council to demand—and monitor—better oil-spill prevention and response (HB 1459). People for Puget Sound and other environmental leaders strongly support the bill. The oil industry opposes it. But the Dalco Passage damage proved, yet again, that we must have zero tolerance for oil spill risks, and strong citizen oversight will help.



Slumlord Accountability Act

When more than 400 dangerous health and safety violations forced the City of Burien to shut down the Juanita apartment complex in January, 2004, city taxpayers paid \$70,000 to relocate the families who were suddenly homeless. We've proposed the Slumlord Accountability Act (HB 1583) to make slumlords—not taxpayers—pay to relocate families when a city is forced to shut down unsafe dwellings to protect health and safety. Thank you to the City of Burien for supporting our efforts to protect taxpayers and tenants from irresponsible slum lords.





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Mental Health Parity

Great news! After years of trying, earlier this month we passed a strong 'Mental Health Parity' law. This law will prevent insurers from arbitrarily limiting needed treatment or charging higher co-pays or other out-of-pocket expenses for mental health services than are charged for other medical services. Similar laws in 33 other states have dramatically improved access to mental health treatment with very little impact on insurance premiums. Every major medical organization in the state supported our new law. Governor Gregoire signed the legislation into law on March 9.

Insuring more workers and families

Nearly 600,000 Washingtonians, including tens of thousands of children, have no health insurance. This crisis hurts all of us. It means more kids in school without immunizations, overburdened hospital emergency rooms and huge costs for taxpayers and businesses: State taxpayers and citizens pay nearly \$400 million every year for uncompensated health care!

Soaring health costs are a national crisis, but good state policies can help. I'm using my role as chair of the House Health Care committee to lead several reforms.

Health Care Responsibility Act

Big employers who don't insure their employees undercut responsible employers who do, and stick the rest of us with the bills. That's why I've proposed the Health Care Responsibility Act (HB 1702), which would require large employers (51 or more employees) to either provide basic health insurance or pay a fee to offset taxpayer costs for covering their workers' health needs.

Doctors, hospitals, labor organizations and a growing number of businesses support the HCRA, as do 76 percent of state voters. Opposition from some businesses will make it hard to pass the measure this year, but we're clearly gaining momentum as more people see that we cannot afford to pay ever-larger health care bills for irresponsible employers.

"It's the right thing. It's the right time. I urge its passage"

Insurance Commissioner Mike Kreidler on the HCRA

Small Business Assist Program

Many small businesses want to provide employee health coverage, but can't afford fast-rising premium costs. I'm sponsoring a plan to help small businesses buy affordable health insurance through the state Health Care Authority (HCA). Our plan also calls for a benefits package to be tailored to small business employees and would help with premiums for low-wage workers (HB 2069).

Prescription Drug Reform: next steps

I'm proud taxpayers are saving millions of dollars because of our earlier prescription drug reforms, but many seniors and others still struggle to afford needed medicines. They need help, too. I'm calling for further reforms to provide needed help with drug prices.

Prescription Drug Purchasing Consortium

I've proposed allowing citizens, businesses, unions and local governments to join the state in a buying alliance to lower drug costs (HB 1219). This drug-purchasing consortium would not only help all participants save money through lower state-negotiated drug prices, it would help our state bargain for even greater savings in the future. Gov. Gregoire asked me to sponsor this bill, which is strongly supported by labor, local governments, AARP and others who represent Washington's seniors and consumers.

Medicines from Canada

It hurts to hear people describe how they cut pills and skip doses, or even meals, to afford medicines, especially when we know we're paying 30 to 80 percent more than Canadians for the identical prescription drugs. There are answers. I'm supporting policies to improve access to affordable Canadian medicines, by:

- (1) Enabling state health care programs to save tax dollars by buying Canadian medicines in bulk, while also helping individuals to safely buy affordable Canadian medicines (HB 1194).
- (2) Licensing Canadian mail-order pharmacies to ensure that imported medicines are safe and effective (HB 1168)
- (3) Allowing local pharmacists to buy medicines wholesale from Canada for customers who have no prescription drug insurance (HB 1316).

The House has already passed these measures, and I expect the Senate to join us. However, we will need federal permission to bring these savings to Washington.



Rep. Joe McDermott

School Breakfasts

Do you eat breakfast every day? Some children don't. They go to school on an empty stomach. This just isn't right, that's why I introduced House Bill 1771, which requires schools to provide breakfast to kids from low-income families.

Breakfast is the most important meal of the day; this is especially true when it comes to kids. When children's nutritional needs are met, they're more attentive in class, have better attendance, fewer disciplinary problems, and they increase their math and reading scores.

But 40 percent of the 1.25 million people resorting to food banks are children. And Washington State ranks tenth in hunger, according to a USDA national survey.

My bill, which targets schools with high concentrations of students from low-income families, ensures that more than 5,700 students would get a free breakfast every school day.

Statewide Smoking Ban

People have a right to consume substances that put their lives at risk. They don't have a right to put others at risk as well. Yet we know that breathing other people's tobacco smoke is hazardous to adults and even more dangerous for children.

There are almost 4000 chemicals in a single cigarette. In addition to nicotine and tar, they contain arsenic, acetic acid, ammonia, benzene, cadmium, formaldehyde, hexamine, naphthalene, nitrobenzene, phenol, stearic acid, styrene, vinyl chloride. . . just to name a few. No wonder second-hand smoke can make you sick.

Every year more people die from tobacco use and secondhand smoke than from AIDS, car accidents, alcohol consumption, suicides, homicides, fire, and illegal drugs—combined.

Every year more than 8,300 Washingtonians die from tobacco-related diseases. And Washington taxpayers pick up a \$1.5 billion tab in tobacco related health care costs every year. In fact, long-term smokers typically cost the state \$12,000 more in health care costs than non-smokers.

I'm proposing a law (HB 2038) to ban smoking in all indoor public places—including restaurants, bars, taverns, pool halls, and bowling alleys. We have to protect the choice of non-smokers—children and adults alike—by making public places smoke-free.

Second-hand smoke is a major reason why waitresses are three times more likely to die of lung cancer and 2.5 times more likely to die of heart disease than women in other occupations. No one should have to work in an environment that makes people die younger.

Seven other states have already banned smoking in indoor public places: Maine, Massachusetts, Connecticut, Delaware, New York, Rhode Island, and California. People didn't quit going to their favorite restaurants or bars in these states. On the contrary, surveys found that more people are eating out.

Clean air is good for business, but above all, it's a health issue and it's just common sense.

Simple Majority

I believe voters should decide whether a simple majority is sufficient to approve a school levy, that's why I supported a bill—for the third year in a row—that does just that. A few weeks ago the House voted 73-25 in favor of putting before voters a proposed state constitutional amendment that would allow school levies to pass by a simple majority rather than the 60% supermajority now required. The bill is on its way to the Senate, where it must pass by a two-thirds majority.

Learning Assistance Program (LAP)

The LAP was created to help school districts raise student achievement. But when schools were successful in raising student achievement, they lost program funding because funding was based on test scores. This then resulted in poor student performance again.

Last year the Legislature eventually passed legislation that bases program funding half on test scores and half on poverty, since research shows that there is a high correlation between poverty and academic challenge. This year I am striving to base the formula entirely on poverty as I had originally intended last year.

It will help school districts offer and sustain effective programs that assist struggling students to meet the state's academic standards. Many education organizations believe that it is the best policy for driving LAP funding to school districts.

Election Reform

We are the greatest democracy on the planet, and what's more basic to our country's brand of democracy than counting everyone's vote—and making sure that everyone's vote counts?

The incredibly close election for governor has shaken confidence in our election system; we need to adopt comprehensive election reform in our state that will prevent this sort of problem from occurring again.

One solution is to change the date of the primary. If the primary is moved earlier in the year, it would give county auditors more time to send out absentee ballots, especially to our military voters overseas.



The Budget: a balancing act

Despite years of severe program reductions, our state is again facing a budget shortfall of \$2.2 billion. There is just not enough revenue coming in to keep pace with rising costs for health care, education, prisons and other critical needs.

Solving this deficit will require hard choices, and we believe the choices must look toward improving revenues as well as spending reductions (see the accountability story below).

Whatever decisions are made by the Legislature this year, be assured that we will only support a budget that:

- Makes education our top funding priority, and gives young people the opportunity to achieve their goals;
- Is fair to working families; and
- Meets our responsibilities to senior citizens, health care and the neediest of our citizens.

We continue to strongly believe that we can give citizens better value for their tax dollars without sacrificing the moral values that make Washington a great place to live. Our budget choices will reflect this commitment.



Holding government accountable

Early this year we passed two strong accountability measures. One will make state spending more efficient by requiring independent performance audits of all state agencies and operations. The other requires regular reviews of tax exemptions. Washington keeps about 500 tax breaks in the books. They were granted to encourage economic development—and the good-paying jobs that go with it. Without oversight and accountability, however, they can easily become nothing more than undeserved government subsidies.

We need to determine if state spending and special tax breaks are actually working as intended. The public has a right to know that taxes are fair, and that every dollar of taxes is being well spent.



Students from Lafayette elementary school visited with us at the capitol campus early in the session.



Free Family Reconciliation Services

Did you know that adolescents and parents can get free family reconciliation services in times of need through Washington's Children and Family Services? Willing youths and parents can get up to 12 hours of in-home crisis counseling in a 45-day period. Parents can also file petitions asking the court to intervene when 'at-risk' kids are out of control and need help.

You can find out more by calling the toll-free Children's Administration intake lines. The numbers for King County intake are 1-800-609-8764, or after hours at 1-800-562-5624.



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